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# United Nations Development Assistance Framework: meta-evaluation and synthesis

## Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Meta-evaluation and synthesis of United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluations, with a particular focus on poverty eradication".

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JIU/REP/2016/6

# INDEPENDENT SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OF OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

## META-EVALUATION AND SYNTHESIS OF UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE FRAMEWORK EVALUATIONS, WITH A PARTICULAR FOCUS ON POVERTY ERADICATION

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**Geneva 2016**

## Acknowledgements

In my capacity as inspector of the Joint Inspection Unit, and as Chair of the Evaluation Management Group, I would like to thank and acknowledge the important group of stakeholders who played a role in supporting the present evaluation.

At the outset, I should like to express my deep appreciation and gratitude to former Inspector Gerard Biraud who was the lead author of this pilot evaluation till 31 December 2015 when he completed his second term as Inspector of the Joint Inspection Unit.

I would like to thank Member States for their foresight in selecting a topic that is relevant for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and for providing extrabudgetary resources to pilot the conduct of this independent meta-evaluation and synthesis of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluations.

The present evaluation benefited from the substantive and strategic guidance of a key stakeholder reference group that included representatives of Member States, United Nations system entities, Resident Coordinators' Offices, global experts and non-governmental organizations.

Appreciation goes to the six evaluation offices of United Nations system entities that contributed to the evaluation as members of the Evaluation Management Group to enhance its professional and technical quality.

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I would like to thank the secretariat of the Joint Inspection Unit and the coordination secretariat of the independent system-wide evaluation mechanism for their extensive support in the day-to-day management and administrative support of the pilot evaluation.

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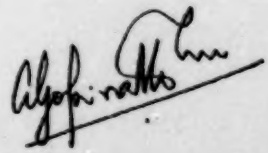

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## Foreword

The present meta-evaluation and synthesis exercise of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework intends to examine both the quality of Framework evaluations conducted in the period 2009-2014 and to subsequently draw conclusions from those evaluations to provide an assessment of the contribution of the United Nations system to poverty reduction. The evaluation provides a good opportunity to identify and highlight, in a systematic manner, the challenges related to the evaluative process of Framework activities, in order to guide decision-making for the strengthening of the overall value of Framework evaluations, as a mechanism for United Nations system-wide accountability and learning at the country level.

The evaluation concludes that there is an alarming lack of commitment from stakeholders in the Framework evaluation process, highlighted by the low level of compliance with the requirement for an evaluation and with the quality standards promoted in related guidance. Furthermore, a low level of participation from national stakeholders has been identified, along with significant issues of coordination and cooperation in the evaluation activities conducted by the United Nations entities at the country level. The recommendations presented in the present review are aimed at addressing the strategic implications of the strengthening of the Framework evaluation system as a vital part in the overall United Nations planning framework.

The enhancement of the Framework evaluation mechanism will involve a commitment by senior decision-makers within the United Nations system and those of Member States. An active partnership will be necessary to enhance the quality and relevance of the Framework evaluation mechanism so that it can play its rightful role as a mechanism to promote cooperation, organizational leaning and positive feedback. The present review is a first step in that process of renewal and redirection.

## Executive summary

**United Nations Development Assistance Framework**
**Meta-evaluation and synthesis**
**JIU/REP/2016/6**


On 21 December 2012, the General Assembly adopted its resolution 67/226 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system. Following that, in paragraph 8 of its resolution 68/229, the Assembly mandated that two pilot independent system-wide evaluations be conducted in 2014, subject to the availability of extrabudgetary resources, one of which on the "meta-evaluation and synthesis of United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluations, with a particular focus on poverty eradication".

The meta-evaluation and synthesis was designed to identify and assess the benefits of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluations. The specific purposes of the present review have been to:

- Conduct an assessment of Framework evaluations in the period 2009-2014 to determine the overall quality, credibility and use or evaluations, in order to provide advice on possible improvements and adjustments to existing Framework evaluation guidelines
- Identify key findings, conclusions and recommendations of Framework evaluations undertaken in the period 2009-2014 in order to assess the contribution of the United Nations system in achieving national development goals for planning and adjustments to current strategies

Internal administrative and operational considerations, especially the challenges with regard to the mobilization of extrabudgetary resources, resulted in the assignment being carried over to 2016.

**Main findings and conclusions**

The first significant finding of the review is the very low rate of compliance with the 2010 United Nations Development Group guidelines that mandate an evaluation at the end of each Framework cycle. Between 2010 and 2014, 33 out of 88 programme countries (or 37.5 per cent) with active Framework cycles submitted evaluations as per the Guidelines, issuing 36 Framework evaluations. This low rate of compliance calls into question the degree to which evaluations play an organizational learning role in the Framework process.

A lack of adequate financial resources most likely contributed to this low rate. However, it may not have been the sole factor for the low levels of participation: factors such as overlap and duplication with other evaluations being undertaken at the country level, along with a lack of commitment to the Framework evaluation itself, also resulted in the low rate of compliance. Therefore, if the Framework evaluation is to continue to be the feedback and organizational learning component of the overall process, measures will need to be taken to strengthen commitment to the evaluation process.

Of equal importance, only 23 of the 36 Framework evaluations were of sufficient quality as to warrant a more in-depth examination of their content, with a view to drawing conclusions with respect to the contribution of the United Nations system in achieving national development goals. This further underscores the challenge of assessing the degree to which Framework evaluations play a feedback and organizational learning role.

The low level of participation of Member States in the Framework evaluation process points to another challenge. The philosophy that underpins the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development implies that the primary responsibilities of the United Nations system at the country level are to support the development plans of Member States and their strategies to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, utilizing contextually sensitive programming and support. The low rate of participation in the Framework implies that the evaluation process did not engage Member States as active stakeholders. Moreover, the degree of Member State participation in the design and implementation of the Framework itself may not have been optimal. Therefore, it will be important to provide guidance to the United Nations system to ensure it actively encourages the participation of programme countries in the Framework and to encourage programme countries to engage actively in the development and implementation of Framework activities and their monitoring and evaluation.

Several methodological and conceptual gaps emerge with regard to the quality of Framework activities as analysed through the Framework evaluations. Notwithstanding the low rate of compliance of evaluations (37.5 per cent), some common threads could be highlighted.

First, key building blocks for an evaluation appear to be missing, or of limited importance, in many Framework evaluations. The utilization of robust evaluation methodologies in accordance with the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group has only been partially undertaken. Stakeholder input has largely been limited to country team members. Similarly, data sets have largely been restricted to desk-based document review. Significantly, the recommendations sections of the Framework evaluations are generally deficient in addressing more strategic issues and proposing actionable recommendations, as opposed to ones that cannot be measured or easily implemented. These deficiencies limit the utility of evaluations as a tool for feedback and organizational learning.

Second, only 23 of the Framework evaluations, or approximately half, appear to have generated management responses, suggesting that country team management has not invested sufficient effort in assessing the implications of the Framework evaluations. Taken together with the low number of evaluations in the first place, the willingness of country team management to support the important role of evaluations in the entire Framework cycle can be called into question. Measures to fill these gaps will need to be taken.

To gauge how the Framework evaluation process has provided a platform for organizational learning, it is necessary to review how the evaluations have assessed the content of the Framework reports themselves with respect to the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, potential impact and sustainability of United Nations actions. The 2010 United Nations Development Group guidelines refer to the issue of "impact" to be addressed via Framework evaluations.

Although the contribution of Framework activities to poverty reduction is central to their reason for being, only two Framework evaluations established a solid link between such activities and their "impact" and government poverty alleviation goals and strategies. This limits the value of the Framework evaluation mechanism as a means of strengthening the Framework system. It also illustrates the extent to which the Framework evaluation process is significantly limited in its ability to address primary issues, such as the demonstration of how the Framework process contributes to national poverty alleviation goals.

Furthermore, not all of the programming principles of the Framework have been integrated. Environmental sustainability and capacity-development are seldom mentioned. This leads to the conclusion that the principles themselves are probably insufficiently articulated in Framework activities, resulting in a significant programmatic gap.

The present review examined a number of internal processes of the United Nations at the country level designed to strengthen the relevance and subsequent implementation of Framework activities. However, the limited evidence garnered from the Framework evaluations indicates less than optimal levels of coordination and cooperation, thus hindering the overall effectiveness of the delivery of United Nations programming at the country level, and inefficiencies in joint programming and inter-agency work under different Framework pillars. Moreover, the four "Delivering as one" programme countries that prepared evaluation reports experienced the same kind of coordination challenges as other country teams.

The present meta-evaluation and synthesis has laid out a sobering picture of the current state of the utility of the Framework evaluation process and, by implication, some aspects of the Framework process itself. There now appears to be a degree of willingness to recognize that the past performance with respect to the Framework evaluations has been inadequate and that corrective measures are necessary.

These shortfalls are addressed through a set of strategic recommendations. Caution was exercised to develop a set of actionable recommendations that were sufficiently detailed so as to address the issues at hand, but not excessively prescriptive as to constrain the development of context-specific solutions.

The recommendations are designed less to fix specific challenges and shortfalls, than to address the implications of the strengthening of the Framework evaluation system as a vital part in the overall United Nations planning framework. With the emphasis on nationally contextual solutions as a primary focus of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Framework process as a whole acquires greater salience.

**Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1**

The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives' Board for Coordination as appropriate, revise, through the United Nations Development Group, programming guidance for the United Nations Development Assistance Framework to emphasize the centrality of the active participation of

Member States, especially programme countries, throughout the design and subsequent implementation and evaluation. This revised guidance for country teams and Resident Coordinators' Offices should lay out clear guidelines and systematic approaches for interaction with officials of the Governments of the respective programme country and sensitization on programming principles related to their national development priorities and plans; and, introduce a more systematic approach to mainstream the programming principles into the Framework process.

**Recommendation 2**

The General Assembly should, through the quadrennial comprehensive policy review process, encourage Member States, especially programme countries, to more fully participate in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework process at the country level by means of early engagement during the development of upcoming Frameworks and participation to the fullest extent throughout their implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The Economic and Social Council should, within the quadrennial comprehensive policy review process, keep under constant review and monitor the measures taken by the United Nations country teams to facilitate the engagement of the programme countries throughout the Framework cycle, including its evaluation.

**Recommendation 3**

The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives' Board for Coordination as appropriate, initiate, through the United Nations Development Group, a process for sensitizing and specifically instructing Resident Coordinators on the importance of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluation process as a critical element in the overall United Nations country-level planning processes; and, specifically, for requiring Resident Coordinators to develop an action plan and timetable for conducting Framework or follow-up evaluations on instruments, for example, sustainable development frameworks, and to integrate the conduct of Framework evaluations into the performance management framework of the Resident Coordinators.

**Recommendation 4**

The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives' Board for Coordination as appropriate, request other United Nations agencies to coordinate their evaluation activities at the country level so that such activities can be better integrated into the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluation process.

**Recommendation 5**

The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives' Board for Coordination as appropriate, revisit, through the United Nations Development Group, the 2010 evaluation guidelines and subsequent direction in the light of the findings of the present report, with a view to strengthening their methodological rigour and design and to increasing the rate of compliance; in particular, the modified guidance should:

(a) Emphasize the requirement for actionable recommendations with a clear target audience and time frame for implementation that comply with the United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards;

(b) Document the mainstreaming of the Framework programming principles and, in particular, those relating to environmental sustainability;

(c) Utilize a robust evaluation design based on multiple data sources, in addition to desk-based (document) reviews and stakeholder interviews.

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## Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CEB | United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNEP | United Nations Environment Programme |
| UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| UNIDO | United Nations Industrial Development Organization |
| WFP | World Food Programme |
| WHO | World Health Organization |

# I. Introduction: purpose and background

## A. Purpose

1. On 21 December 2012, the General Assembly adopted its resolution 67/226 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system. Following that, in paragraph 8 of its resolution 68/229, the Assembly mandated that two pilot independent system-wide evaluations be conducted in 2014, "subject to the provision and availability of extrabudgetary resources" and decided that the themes of those two evaluations should be "meta-evaluation and synthesis of United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluations, with a particular focus on poverty eradication" and "evaluation of the contribution of the United Nations development system to strengthening national capacities for statistical analysis and data collection to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals".

2. In paragraph 8 of its resolution 68/229, the General Assembly took note of the policy for independent system-wide evaluation of United Nations operational activities for development. According to that policy,[1] the definition of an independent system-wide evaluation is "a systematic and impartial assessment of the relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of the combined contributions of United Nations entities towards the achievements of collective development objectives".

3. In April 2015, pending the formal establishment of the Evaluation Management Group and the key stakeholder reference group, the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations system (JIU) established an ad hoc advisory group consisting of representatives of Member States and United Nations entities.

4. The Evaluation Management Group was established by the Joint Inspection Unit in close consultation with the United Nations Evaluation Group in June 2015, and comprises seven members, including the Unit as Chair.

5. In the third quarter of 2015, the Evaluation Management Group approved an inception paper for the meta-evaluation and synthesis of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework. The members of the Group established the key stakeholder reference group on the basis of a mapping of key stakeholders and composed of 13 members (4 of whom were also members of the ad hoc advisory group).

6. Internal administrative and operational considerations, especially the challenges with regard to the mobilization of extrabudgetary resources, resulted in the assignment being carried over to 2016.

[1] Available from www.un.org/en/ecosoc/julyhls/pdf13/policy_for_independent_system-wide_evaluation_of_operational_activities_for_development_of_the_united_nations.pdf.

## B. Background

### Need to evaluate the United Nations Development Assistance Framework

7. The United Nations Development Assistance Framework refers to a unified approach towards common development goals at the country level. The common country assessment and the Framework were adopted as strategic planning tools for the United Nations system. Guidelines for their preparation were first issued in April 1999 and later revised in 2002, 2004 and 2010 to reflect lessons at the time and to take into account the United Nations Millennium Declaration.

8. Five years after it encouraged the United Nations development system to intensify its collaboration at the country level through the Framework, the General Assembly, as a conclusion of its 2007 Triennial comprehensive policy review, decided in 2012 to assess how the new tool had been effective and efficient, in particular from 2010 to 2014. While ongoing efforts to improve transparency, accountability and results-based management in the United Nations system were recognized by the General Assembly in its resolution 67/226 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, there continued to be a need to strengthen independent and impartial system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development.

9. In the policy framework for independent system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development, meta-evaluation was identified as the most rapid and economical of the three approaches embedded in the independent system-wide evaluation policy, elaborated in 2013 in a note by the Secretary-General (A/68/658-E/2014/7), submitted to the Economic and Social Council and taken note of by the General Assembly in its resolution 68/229.

10. The present review becomes significant, given that past efforts to assess the quality of Framework evaluations had noted several weaknesses.[2] No systematic evaluation of the Framework has yet been attempted. As the present review was primarily based on desk-based methods, it invariably limits the extent to which conclusions can be drawn regarding the performance of the United Nations system in its contribution to development results at the country level.

### Need to evaluate Framework evaluations

11. Prior to undertaking any synthesis of the lessons learned from the Framework process, it was necessary to review and assess the technical adequacy of the Framework evaluations. This, therefore, is the purpose of the meta-evaluation part of the report.

12. Structured as a primarily desk-based analysis, the first part of the report (meta-evaluation) examines the technical quality of Framework evaluations and the adequacy of resources dedicated to them. The second part (synthesis) looks back at

[2] Past efforts to assess Framework evaluation quality include: R. Longhurst, "Review of the Role and Quality of the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks" (2006), available from https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Review_of_the_Role_and_Quality_of_UNDAFs.pdf; and P. Balogun, "The relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework" (2012), available from www.un.org/esa/coordination/pdf/undaf_report.pdf.

the learning and performance of the United Nations country teams as assessed by Framework evaluations and seeks to provide forward-looking recommendations, designed to improve the process of strategic planning, programme development and implementation. The report is also designed as an input into the deliberations of the 2016 quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities of the United Nations development system.

# II. Objectives, methodologies, scope and deliverables

## A. Objectives

13. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 68/229, the objectives of the meta-evaluation and synthesis are to assess, in line with the United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards for evaluation in the United Nations system, the overall quality, credibility, utility and utilization the Framework evaluations; and synthesize the major and key findings, conclusions and recommendations of Framework evaluations published between 2010 and 2014.

14. The intended purposes of the meta-evaluation and synthesis are to:

- Conduct an assessment of Framework evaluations in the period 2009-2014 to determine the overall quality, credibility and use of evaluations in order to provide advice on improvements and adjustments to existing Framework evaluation guidelines
- Identify key findings, conclusions and recommendations of Framework evaluations undertaken in the period 2009-2013 in order to assess the contribution of the United Nations system in achieving national development goals to inform the 2016 quadrennial comprehensive policy review for planning and adjustments to current strategies.

15. The target audiences for the meta-evaluation and synthesis are States Member of the United Nations, Governments of programme countries, officials of the United Nations system organizations at the headquarters, regional and country levels, and evaluators who conduct Framework evaluations.

## B. Overview of methodologies

16. The present review employed a mixed-methods approach so as to better calibrate limited and sometimes incomplete data. Framework evaluations and similar national-level reports were gathered online and by other direct means to establish the scope of the assignment. An electronic survey of Resident Coordinators was used to fill in data gaps and identify qualitative factors influencing the development of Framework evaluations. An evaluation matrix containing key evaluation questions was developed. For each of the components of the meta-evaluation and synthesis, a separate rating tool was developed. The assignment was designed to be a pilot, examining the effectiveness of a desk-based review, with only limited direct interviewing.

17. In order to contextualize the review, it is necessary first to present the evaluation questions for both the meta-evaluation and synthesis components.

18. The evaluation questions guiding the meta-evaluation segment are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1
**Evaluation questions guiding the meta-evaluation**

| *Substantive area for the meta-evaluation* | *Key evaluation questions* |
|---|---|
| Coverage | How many Framework programme countries have produced Framework evaluations? |
| | What are the main reasons for not undertaking Framework evaluations? |
| Quality | What is the technical quality of Framework evaluations? |
| | To what extent is the evaluative evidence from the Framework evaluation credible, useful and timely?[3] |
| | To what extent are the Framework evaluations resourced in terms of funding, human resources, data inputs and time allocated?[4] |
| | To what extent are the four inputs adequate? |
| | Are current Framework evaluation guidelines and tools adequate? |

19. The evaluation questions guiding the synthesis are illustrated in table 2 below.

Table 2
**Evaluation questions guiding the synthesis**

| *Substantive area for the synthesis* | *Key evaluation questions* |
|---|---|
| | Based on the report findings and conclusions, |
| Poverty eradication | To what extent has the Framework contributed to and made progress towards the achievement of the national poverty alleviation goals and strategies?[5] |
| | What are the challenges or main factors contributing to progress? |
| Mainstreaming the principles | How well have the five programming principles been mainstreamed into the agreed Framework? What are the |

[3] Credibility is measured through the 42 checkpoints in the report quality screening tool.
[4] The set of questions related to the adequacy of inputs (e.g., data and guidelines), and financial and human resources could not be comprehensively addressed owing to incomplete data.
[5] This key evaluation question is only partially addressed in the report owing to limitations in data availability.

| *Substantive area for the synthesis* | *Key evaluation questions* |
|---|---|
| | challenges or main factors contributing to progress? (if any)[6] |
| United Nations system performance | How well aligned is the Framework with national development strategy goals and planning cycles? |
| | Does the Framework facilitate national ownership and leadership during design and implementation stages? |
| | Has the Framework led to a more coherent and coordinated United Nations response to the development needs and priorities of the programme country?[7] |
| | Does the Framework facilitate national access to the full spectrum of United Nations system mandates and resources? |
| | How has the Framework strengthened partnerships between the existing United Nations system at the country level and other development actors (development partnerships beyond the United Nations system)? |

## C. Scope

20. The inception phase of the assignment included the identification of all Framework evaluations from various online information sources within and outside the United Nations system.

21. An initial online request was sent to all Resident Coordinators that any relevant Framework evaluations be made available for the assessment. After considering the number of programme countries with evaluations published between 2010 and 2014 (an initial total of 27 evaluations from 24 programme countries), the number of programme countries without evidence of an evaluation was identified to be 98. Given the low rates of completion in terms of compliance, a follow up online questionnaire was developed with the support of the Evaluation Management Group and sent to all programme countries with an active Framework cycle but without evidence of an Framework evaluation.

22. This follow-up questionnaire was sent to 88 Resident Coordinators' Offices in July and August 2015, with a remarkable 100 per cent response rate.

23. Nine additional Framework evaluations published between 2010 and 2014 were received and one programme country reported not having a Framework at all.

[6] The five programming principles are: the human rights-based approach, gender equality, environmental sustainability, results-based management, and capacity development.

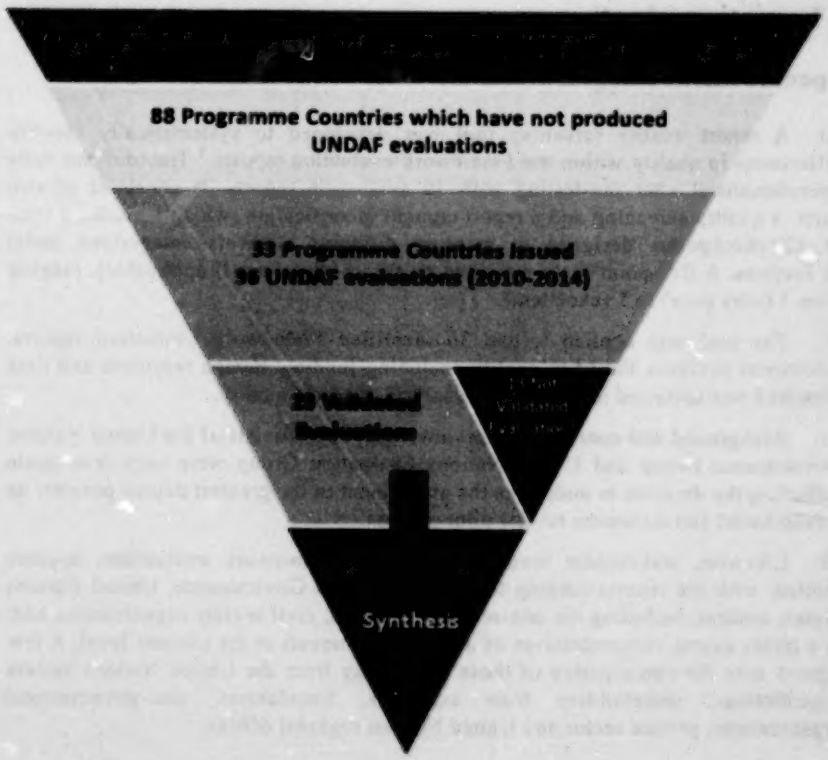
[7] This includes evidence of: (a) the United Nations system reducing gaps and duplication; (b) improving the division of labour among United Nations actors at the country level and enhanced coordination (synergies) with the respective national entities concerned at the strategic and operational levels; (c) a dynamic process during implementation of joint United Nations initiatives (cross sector, advocacy, thematic and/or joint programmes); and (d) the Framework serving as a facilitator of South-South cooperation.

This, in turn, reduced to 88 the total number of programme countries that ought to have produced a Framework evaluation but did not (out of a possible 121 Framework programme countries).

24. Therefore, 36 Framework evaluations were identified. A systematic screening process then took place by using a report quality screening tool. This resulted in 23 Framework evaluations being deemed to meet the criteria from the screening process, which were labelled "validated evaluations" for the purposes of the analysis required for synthesis. The remaining 13 Framework evaluations that did not meet these criteria were labelled "not-validated evaluations".

25. Figure 1 shows the process of how Framework evaluations were identified and screened.

Figure 1
**Screening process for Framework meta-evaluation and synthesis**




## D. Limitations

26. There are major limitations that serve to weaken the usefulness of the present review and need to be taken into consideration when considering the findings, conclusions and especially recommendations.

27. First, the small number of Framework evaluations results considerably limits the scale of the review. Moreover, 15 of the 36 evaluations stem from Latin American or Caribbean countries, clearly a disproportionate geographical representation. By contrast, only 9 stem from Africa.

28. Second, and more importantly, only 23 of the evaluations were deemed to be valid for the purpose of analysing them to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the Framework process to contribute to the attainment of national development goals — the prime object of the synthesis element of the report. This even lower rate, combined with regionally disproportionate reports, hinders the drawing of substantive conclusions.

29. Given the disproportionate nature of the Framework evaluations, it was not possible to develop, as part of the present review, any region-specific findings or conclusions.

# III. The meta-evaluation

## A. Specific methodologies and limitations of the meta-evaluation

30. A report quality screening tool was developed to systematically identify differences in quality within the Framework evaluation reports.[8] The tool was fully operationalized after pre-testing with 10 evaluation reports. It consisted of two parts: a quality screening and a report content identification, which included a total of 42 checkpoints designed to measure different elements categorized under 11 sections. A five-point scale was used on the checkpoints (if applicable), ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent).

31. The tool was applied to the 36 identified Framework evaluation reports. Additional evidence linked to quality, including funding, human resources and time allocated was collected to support the analysis of report quality.

32. Background and contextual interviews with key officials of the United Nations Development Group and United Nations Evaluation Group were very few, again reflecting the decision to undertake the assignment to the greatest degree possible as a desk-based and document review pilot process.

33. Likewise, stakeholder involvement in the Framework evaluations appears limited, with the reports tending to include national Governments, United Nations system entities, including the non-resident agencies, civil society organizations and, to a lesser extent, representatives of donor Governments at the country level. A few reports note the participation of those benefitting from the United Nations system contributions, stakeholders from academia, foundations, non-governmental organizations, private sector and United Nations regional offices.

[8] This tool draws heavily from multiple sources, including the United Nations Evaluation Group quality standards (2005), the United Nations Development Group guidance (2010), and a tested tool produced by the Office of Internal Oversight Services. See the complementary annexes to this report on the JIU website for the list of documents consulted and the report quality screen tool, respectively.

## B. Coverage

34. In their penultimate year, all Framework activities are required to undergo an evaluation that, in turn, is designed to contribute to the strategic orientation of the subsequent Framework.[9] Between 2010 and 2014, 33 out of 88 programme countries (or 37.5 per cent) with active Framework cycles submitted Framework evaluations as per the 2010 United Nations Development Group guidelines, resulting in the issuance of 36 Framework evaluations (see figure 1 above).

35. Given this low level of coverage, the intended roles of the Framework in determining the contribution of the United Nations system to national development priorities and in identifying emerging priorities for future programming, have not been widely achieved. The capacity to use evidence and information from evaluations to guide decision-making and planning is limited.

36. The evidence drawn from the online questionnaire to United Nations Resident Coordinators' Offices indicated the following main reasons for this level of coverage:

- Lack of adequate financial resources or funding
- Inadequate data to assess the results of the contributions from the United Nations system (e.g. financial data, monitoring indicator data or assessments)

37. In specific terms, evidence from the Framework evaluations shows the average budget for the evaluation process to be $34,073.[10] This average cost is consistent with other research undertaken by the Joint Inspection Unit.[11] Reactions from the United Nations Development Group, the United Nations Evaluation Group and the Evaluation Management Group stakeholders highlighted that the amount was well below what they considered to be adequate, namely, in the range of $100,000, for conducting a high quality evaluation process in line with the United Nations Evaluation Group norms, standards and ethical guidelines. However, no formal guidance about the costs of such evaluations has ever been established or provided. A request from the Group about the extent to which the Framework budgets include a description of resource mobilization efforts and an actual financial allocation for Framework evaluation costs revealed that none of the Framework documents had any information about planning for or allocating funding for the Framework evaluation.

38. Therefore, while compelling to some degree, the budgetary argument should not be seen as axiomatic. Rather, it is one of a number of important factors that could have influenced low rates of coverage.

39. Equally, respondents to the online questionnaire indicated that lack of data, sometimes caused by resource shortages, but also the result of inadequate country

[9] 2010 United Nations Development Group guidelines are available from https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/How-to-Prepare-an-UNDAF-Part-I.pdf.

[10] Budget information gathered from the United Nations Development Programme evaluation resource centre (http://erc.undp.org/index.html) was only available for 22 of the 36 assessed reports, or 61 per cent.

[11] See JIU/REP/2014/6, Analysis of the Evaluation Function in The United Nations System, p. 58.

level data gathering by the United Nations agencies, impeded the development of Framework evaluations.

40. Along with (perceived) financial and data gaps, lack of precise direction and coordination has limited the rate of coverage of Framework evaluations.

41. Additional evidence from the questionnaire indicates the inadequate level of participation of the national Government partners and the country teams to conduct Framework evaluations. In some programme countries, it was reported that national partners were frequently "burdened with different evaluation teams asking similar questions". Questionnaire responses highlighted that similar observations typically focus on the area of the United Nations system coordination and collaboration, or the lack thereof.

42. From the few United Nations Development Group and United Nations Evaluation Group stakeholders interviewed, it was observed that each individual United Nations agency may conduct its own country programme evaluation independently of the Framework, and that those evaluations are not sufficiently coordinated to contribute to the Framework evaluation. Data gathered from the online questionnaire points to the need to provide direct, explicit guidance to support coordination and systematic harmonization of evaluation efforts. This way, all evaluative inputs can be fed into the next Framework cycle and thus support the Framework evaluations.

## C. Key findings from the quality screening of Framework evaluations

43. Before examining the quality of Framework evaluations, it is important to review the profiles of the 36 Framework evaluations assessed in the meta-evaluation during the period 2010-2014. Specifically, the majority (53 per cent) are in English language, followed by Spanish (33 per cent), French (11 per cent) and Portuguese (3 per cent). Four evaluations are issued from "Delivering as one" countries in the meta-evaluation sample, including Albania, Cabo Verde, Mozambique and Rwanda.

44. The 11 elements reviewed during the quality assessments were: executive summary; introduction; evaluation methodology; application of evaluation criteria; reporting on results; conclusions; recommendations; format; United Nations coherence analysis; national ownership; and results for results-based management only.

45. While generally satisfactory, several of the factors were lower rated, most notably "recommendations", thereby generally weakening the effectiveness of the Framework evaluation process.

46. An overview of the results of the report quality screening tool, presented in figure 2 below, demonstrated the range of the ratings, with notable weaknesses in the:

Executive summary

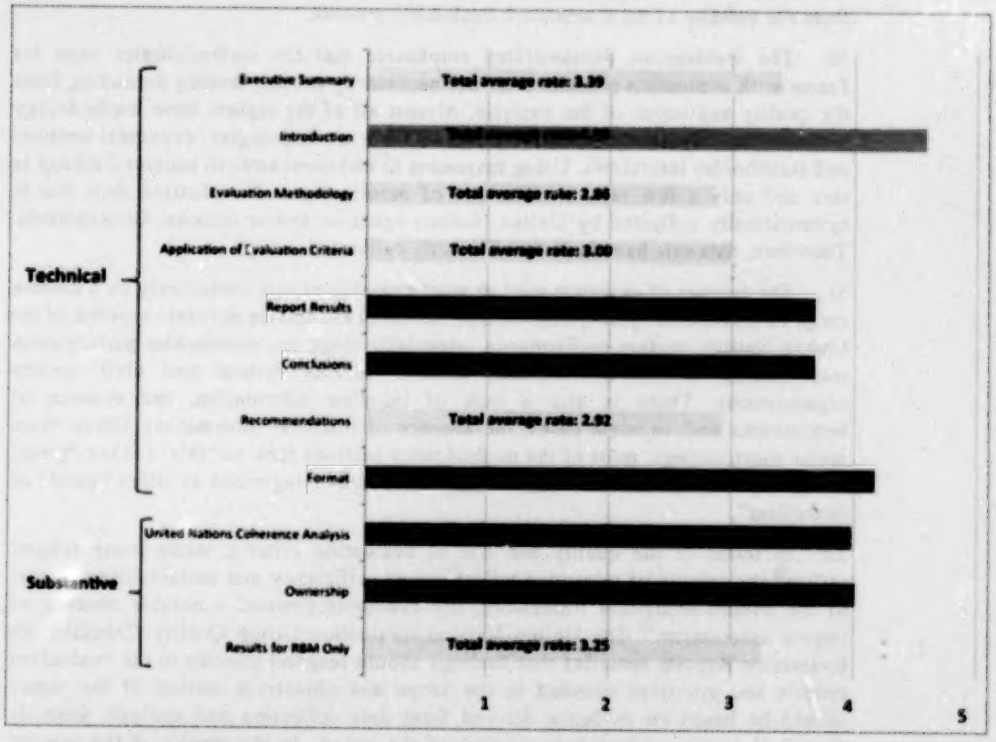
Evaluation methodology

Application of evaluation criteria

Recommendations

Analysis of the monitoring and evaluation framework, or "results for results-based management only".

Figure 2
**Overview of the results from the report quality screening tool**




47. No attempt has been made to develop an average rating across all factors. In the absence of a weighting of individual factors, doing so by a simple equal weight average would have resulted in an artificiality.

48. The most significant shortfalls relate to the relatively low quality of the recommendations. For the Framework evaluation process to constitute a process of learning and strengthening, relevant and high quality recommendations are essential. Recommendations are a core component of evaluations and should be aimed at enhancing the effectiveness, efficiency or sustainability of the project or programme. In terms of content and quality, recommendations should have clear messages, follow from evidenced-based conclusions and should be actionable.[12] However, a large percentage of the observed recommendations were not specific, time-bound or sufficiently actionable. Some 72 per cent of the recommendations

[12] See United Nations Evaluation Group Quality Checklist for Evaluation Reports (2010) (sect. 7, p. 6), available from www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/about_iom/eva_techref/UNEG_Eval_Report.pdf.

sections fell into the "fair", "poor" or "very poor" categories. The majority did not include specific timeframes for implementation, the steps needed to complete them and specific responsibilities for implementation.

49. Limitations in relation to evaluation methodology and application of evaluation criteria demonstrate overall methodological weakness, thereby detracting from the validity of the Framework evaluation process.

50. The weaknesses demonstrated emphasize that the methodologies used for Framework evaluation processes are not necessarily robust, thereby detracting from the quality and scope of the analysis. Almost all of the reports have methodology sections that rely nearly exclusively on two main methodologies: document analysis and stakeholder interviews. Using responses to questionnaires to support findings is rare and only a few reports make use of monitoring and evaluation data that is systematically collected by United Nations agencies and/or national Governments. Therefore, data sets have been insufficiently calibrated.

51. The sources of evidence used in most evaluations rely extensively on a narrow range of stakeholder perceptions and are unlikely to offer an accurate account of the United Nations system performance, especially since the stakeholder participation was limited to the Government, United Nations system and civil society organizations. There is also a lack of baseline information, the absence of benchmarks and, in some cases, the absence of financial information. Given these major shortcomings, most of the methodology sections rank as "fair" (13) or "poor" or "very poor" (13 combined); with only 10 reports categorized as either "good" or "excellent".

52. In terms of the quality and use of evaluation criteria, while many reports utilized the criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability as part of the overall analytical framework, the evaluations reveal a notable absence of impact assessment.[13] The United Nations Evaluation Group Quality Checklist for Evaluation Reports specifies that findings should respond directly to the evaluation criteria and questions detailed in the scope and objectives section of the report should be based on evidence derived from data collection and analysis methods described in the methodology section of the report. In the period of the present review, in 8 out of 36 evaluations, or approximately one quarter, evaluation criteria were either not included or given as not applicable. In most cases, however, this analytical framework was not required in their terms of reference. The reports that did not apply the evaluation criteria were published in 2011 and 2012, which was before the full roll-out of the 2010 United Nations Development Group guidelines.

53. Only a handful of reports addressed the mandated evaluation criterion of "impact" even in the most tangential fashion. Moreover, only 2 out of 36 evaluation reports included a results chain, which facilitates the identification of anticipated results through different steps (e.g., input, output, outcomes and impact).[14] Furthermore, nearly all of the reports ranked "fair" or "poor" demonstrated

[13] According to the 2010 United Nations Development Group guidelines, "the results expected from the Framework evaluation are considered judgement about the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of Framework results" (page 17).

[14] United Nations Evaluation Group, standard 4.12.

analytical gaps and a lack of robust supporting evidence in the way their conclusions were justified.

54. These shortfalls in methodology point to an overall limitation in the Framework evaluation process, namely, lack of sufficient evaluation quality as part of the report development process. While the present review was unable to determine the direct consequences of these shortfalls, combined with the shortfalls related to recommendations, these gaps call into question the worth of the Framework evaluations as they are currently undertaken.

55. The overall rating of the other assessed factors, while satisfactory, demonstrates a degree of inherent weakness that detracts from the overall effectiveness of Framework evaluations.

56. Figure 2 demonstrates the extent to which the other assessed factors (for example, "format" and "ownership") averaged in the upper ranges of the "fair" category (3-4). Limitations were found in all these factors, with the ratings being degraded because a number of the reports simply did not address them. For example, the rating for "quality of results reporting" is weakened by the fact that five of the reports had either "poor" or "very poor" reporting on results.

57. Nevertheless, the extent to which the present review has demonstrated only moderately satisfactory aggregated ratings points to the need for the United Nations system to provide both improved direction for strengthening the Framework evaluation process and enhanced leadership for addressing issues of low coverage.

58. The overall use of Framework evaluations as instruments to promote organizational learning appears to be mixed, raising questions about their value.

59. Results regarding the utilization of Framework evaluations have been based on the online questionnaire, the few selected interviews and the availability of management responses. The 2010 United Nations Development Group guidelines call for a written and agreed management response by the country teams and the Government of the programme country following the conduct of an evaluation. While half of the evaluations have a management response, the remaining either do not have a management response posted, or there is "no information" available. Some additional management responses may exist, but may not be available via electronic means. Nevertheless, this gap points to a challenge with respect to how United Nations country teams appear to conceptualize the Framework process and view its overall worth. This finding can be inferred to imply a broad-based tendency to view the process as one of compliance, whereby the evaluation is performed as a matter of process, as opposed to one of organizational learning, whereby it becomes a catalyst for renewal and redirection.

# IV. Synthesis

## A. Specific methodologies and purpose

60. The synthesis is formulated from 36 Framework evaluations that have been screened for quality, using the report quality screening tool. Out of 36 Framework evaluation reports, 23 reports, or 64 per cent, meet the qualifying criteria, namely,

the Framework evaluations which had an overall assessment of "fair", "good", or "excellent" and are labelled "validated evaluations".

61. The report quality screening tool was then used to generate an overall view of identified substantive areas in poverty eradication and the five programming principles, based on the key findings, conclusions and recommendations of all 23 validated Framework evaluations. It is based on a three-point scale: 1 = mostly negative results reported; 2 = mixed results reported; and 3 = mostly positive results reported. The five programming principles constitute a starting point, and for all of the stages of the Framework formulation, including results planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. According to the United Nations Development Group, all Framework evaluations should address these key cross-cutting issues.[15]

62. The purpose of the synthesis was to review the past experiences of country teams with respect to the contribution of the United Nations system to the achievement of national goals, by:

Understanding the extent to which the United Nations system achieves concrete results in assisting the programme countries to eradicate poverty (effectiveness);

Learning about the alignment of the Framework to national needs and priorities (relevance), national ownership (sustainability) and how coherence and coordination among United Nations organizations at the country level are progressing (efficiency), including any challenges or opportunities;

Non-resident agency engagement;

Partnerships with actors beyond the United Nations.

63. The synthesis is an assessment of the Framework evaluation reports that have been deemed to be of sufficient quality for more detailed analysis. The synthesis, therefore, is not an assessment of the quality of the Frameworks themselves.

## B. Findings

64. The findings below are organized on the basis of the analytical framework (see table 2 above) for the synthesis, namely, on poverty eradication, mainstreaming of programming principles and United Nations system performance.

### Poverty eradication, alignment and leadership

65. Only two of the 23 validated Framework evaluations established a factually based link between Framework activities and their impact and government poverty alleviation goals and strategies, thereby limiting the value of the Framework evaluation mechanism as a means of strengthening the Framework system.

66. This finding underscores the extent to which the Framework evaluation process is limited not only in scope, but also in its ability to address primary issues, such as how the Framework process contributes to national poverty alleviation goals.

[15] See https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/How-to-Prepare-an-UNDAF-Part-I.pdf, and http://www.un.cv/files/5%20How%20to%20Prepare%20an%20UNDAF%20(Part%20II).pdf.

67. The review processes used for the synthesis were designed to analyse the Framework evaluations and not the Frameworks themselves. Therefore, this finding must be interpreted in the context of whether Framework evaluations addressed this issue.

68. The causes for this shortfall relate to lack of data in some instances. Some of the reports assessed take note of the lack of disaggregated data or information discussing the direct benefits of United Nations system operational activities on vulnerable and marginalized groups. Other challenges relate to a reliance on mainly desk-based methods to undertake the Framework evaluations, thereby hampering their ability to draw more nuanced conclusions about the experiences of the United Nations system in contributing to the achievement of the national poverty alleviation goals.

69. While the links between national poverty eradication goals and Frameworks are not well laid out in Framework evaluations, nearly all evaluations highlight the extent to which poverty eradication themes and similar processes are emphasized in the Frameworks, thereby demonstrating the degree of sensitivity in the Frameworks to poverty alleviation.

70. The poverty alleviation themes were identified from a content analysis of the 23 Framework evaluations reviewed. Table 3 below presents the frequency of the most commonly cited poverty alleviation themes in each programme country's Framework. All but one Framework evaluation provided an assessment of the extent to which vulnerable groups are targeted through the Framework. The other thematic areas are democratic processes and governance; and accessing education and health services was frequently cited. By contrast, only four Framework evaluations cited disaster risk reduction as a major thematic element.

Table 3
**Frequency of Framework evaluations covering poverty alleviation-related themes**

| *Poverty alleviation theme presented in the Framework evaluation* | *Noted in the number of reports* | *Percentage of the total number of reports* |
|---|---|---|
| Inclusion of vulnerable groups | 22 | 95.7 |
| Democratic processes and governance | 20 | 87 |
| Access to education | 20 | 87 |
| Access to health services | 17 | 73.9 |
| Food security and nutrition | 17 | 73.9 |
| Productive employment and decent work | 17 | 73.9 |
| Environmental sustainability | 14 | 60.9 |
| Social protection | 14 | 60.9 |
| HIV/AIDS | 10 | 43.5 |

71. The degree to which these positive poverty alleviation themes have been identified in Framework evaluations is significant. The inclusion in most Framework evaluation reports of references to many poverty alleviation themes tends to illustrate the utility of the Framework process itself as a mechanism to

highlight a variety of poverty alleviation factors. Also, the degree of inclusion points to the extent to which the authors of the Frameworks in individual countries are cognizant of the interrelationships that exist between the various poverty alleviation themes.

72. While all 23 validated evaluations demonstrate linkages between the Framework and national development strategies, the level of synergy that would enable more coordinated programming is not visible.

73. All 23 validated evaluation reports establish positive links between the programme country's Framework and national development strategies. However, based on the assessment of the text of the Framework evaluation, the synchronization with the national planning cycles does not appear to be as positively correlated. In one report, the following example is given of how the Framework has a positive linkage with national development strategies:

> The United Nations Development Assistance Framework is definitely a relevant framework for both the United Nations system and the Government. The Framework enables the Government to understand and organize the work that the United Nations system is developing in [programme country] and to guide the United Nations towards those themes or goals where more support is needed. Meanwhile, for the United Nations system, [the United Nations Development Assistance Framework] is a framework to focus its interventions so they target government needs — in this case, the National Development Plan goals. Indeed, Framework activities respond to the country's development programme and have concluded in a participatory and joint way with both the Government and the United Nations agencies, themes, policies, indicators and aid approaches.

74. The mixed rate of participation of national stakeholders tends to point to limitations in the extent to which the Framework process may be sufficiently participatory, raising issues of ownership and sustainability.

75. Only 9 of the 23 Framework evaluations report positively on national stakeholder participation from the Government and civil society organizations. The majority (14) present mixed or negative findings.

76. For example, in five cases, national partners were not consulted but rather informed of the direction of the United Nations system. In three instances, no mention was made of the level of participation. These negative results point to the United Nations system not making sufficient efforts to encourage national ownership and thus reduce the chance for sustainability.

77. A number of the Framework evaluations provided evidence of strong participation on behalf of government and civil society organizations. For example, in one evaluation, it was stated that: "the process used to develop the Framework for the period 2010-2015 was inclusive and participatory and included the necessary steps as detailed in the update on the formulation procedure that was provided by the Resident Coordinator's Office to the evaluator".

78. However, a number of other reports indicated a more limited level of national involvement during implementation of the Framework and at the regional and

district levels. Two following examples drawn from the evaluations demonstrate this level of participation and inclusion:

> Government involvement took place only at the central level. In the field work, it was noted that provincial and district authorities have very little — if any — information about the Framework and were not consulted or asked by central-level authorities to provide input for the Framework. They were, however, consulted for the elaboration of joint programmes and joint initiatives but the level of consultation was different for each joint initiative. This is related to the fact that, reportedly, agencies have different styles of consultation with some "sitting down with their partners with a blank piece of paper ready for a joint brainstorming" while others "do some preparatory work, arriving at a meeting with fairly detailed ideas that partners are asked to review and comment on".

> The Framework was very relevant in the context of national priorities since it was developed immediately after the Development Plan and it respected the established priorities. However, according to some people, the document only served at the federal level. If the Framework had served at a State level, it would have been more useful.

79. The negative findings also relate specifically to the level of engagement carried out by United Nations system staff. For example, some reports highlighted that the Framework is a United Nations-driven process and not a nationally-driven process. For instance:

> At the central level, the Government participated in reviews of successive drafts, agreed to and signed off on the final version. However, several government officials interviewed indicated that they perceived the Framework process and, to a lesser extent, the Framework itself, as largely United Nations-driven (e.g. "the Framework is essentially a management tool for the United Nations and naturally the United Nations took the lead, but this meant that Government sometimes had little time and opportunity to actively contribute to this process").

80. Equally, there is very little evidence to demonstrate that Frameworks emphasized the importance of South-South cooperation. This shortfall in particular may grow in importance, given the nature of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, which emphasize the benefits of what have been in the past non-traditional mechanisms of cooperation and partnership.

81. This mixed level of participation underlines the need to improve the commitment of the United Nations system to promoting national ownership. Given the extent to which the 2030 Agenda emphasizes nationally contextual solutions, the mixed level of participation in the Framework process as reported by the evaluations points to a fairly urgent requirement to provide improved direction to Resident Coordinators with respect not only to the content of Framework activities, but also the processes by which a Framework is formulated.

**Mainstreaming the five United Nations Development Group programming principles**

82. The majority of the validated Framework evaluations report on the five programming principles, including: the human rights-based approach, gender equality, environmental sustainability, results-based management and capacity-development.[16]

83. A majority of the evaluation reports were able to highlight the positive extent to which the human rights-based approach and gender/equality programming principles were integrated into the Framework.

84. Some 17 reports described how each of the two principles was integrated conceptually into the Framework, the ways in which the principle was reflected in specific programmes and the identified institutional structures that could be introduced to further mainstream the principle, including functioning thematic groups and joint programmes.

85. There appears to be different levels of intensity in integrating the principles into the Framework design and programme implementation. In six reports, very limited evidence was noted to support a comprehensive analysis about how the human rights-based approach and gender/equality programming principles are being mainstreamed. The following quotations, taken from two different reports, clarify that issue:

> The Framework document does not offer a formal framework to support/guide operationally and effectively the guiding principles of United Nations programming. They are not formally invoked/cited in the Framework document. They are completely absent from the list of the five principles of action [...]. As a consequence of this omission, the results framework does not give them their dignity as crosscutting themes.

> The evaluation team highlights that limited evidence was found about mainstreaming. There was a thematic group set up on gender, but it looks like it has not been very effective. The evaluation team did not get any report from this group and annual review reports did not analyse how the five principles were actually mainstreamed.

86. Moreover, based on the Framework evaluations, there is a lack of clarity about the analytical processes undertaken to integrate a human rights-based approach and gender into the Framework design and implementation. For instance, some reports indicate that a process took place, but there is no clear description of the specific steps undertaken to integrate the principles into the Framework programme.

87. These apparent shortcomings may illustrate some level of challenge with respect to the mainstreaming of a human rights-based approach and gender. On balance, however, the preponderance of evaluation reports that identified considerable efforts in those two areas points to a significant achievement with respect to mainstreaming itself and the extent to which the two principles in particular have been embraced by country teams. This degree of integration

[16] See United Nations Development Group, "Guidance Note: Application of the Programming Principles to the United Nations Development Assistance Framework" (January 2010), available from https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/UNDAF-Guidance-Principles-April-2010.pdf.

complements ongoing work of the United Nations to raise awareness of the benefits of the mainstreaming of considerations on a human rights-based approach and gender. It points to a positive degree of support for the core principles in upcoming Frameworks that will reflect the commitments of Agenda 2030.

88. The Framework evaluations showed that two of the principles — environmental sustainability and capacity-development — were seldom addressed and, as such, did not appear to have been integrated to the same degree as gender or a human rights-based approach, the consequence of which tends to point to gaps in the Framework in areas that are recognized as global priorities.

89. Analysis showed that environmental sustainability received the least amount of attention, with 6 out of the 23 validated evaluations providing any comprehensive assessment in that area. Likewise, only 7 out of 23 reports addressed the capacity-development efforts of the United Nations system, as several other reports addressed the principle in sections concerning the relevance of the Framework and the comparative advantage of the United Nation. Furthermore, there was limited evidence to link national capacity-development efforts to sustainable development processes or enhanced national ownership.[17]

90. The consequences of this shortfall, as evidenced by only scattered references in the validated evaluations, are probably more important now than they were at the time of writing the Frameworks themselves and the subsequent evaluation reports. The centrality of environmental and sustainability considerations within the Sustainable Development Goals places considerable additional emphasis on the need for United Nations planning systems to systematically address the breadth and scope of environmental and sustainability considerations. Furthermore, the emphasis in the Sustainable Development Goals and 2030 Agenda on the need for the United Nations to strengthen capacity further highlights a gap in the Framework process that requires attention.

91. The integration of results-based management into the Framework process appears to be inconsistent at best, potentially leading to a considerable weakness in the Framework process in terms of the absence of consistent processes for organizational learning and feedback.

92. The meta-evaluation demonstrated the mixed quality of discussions within the Framework evaluation reports, specifically with respect to the monitoring and evaluation frameworks and the overall functioning of the results-based management systems in general. In brief, there was little evidence, if any, to demonstrate a positive review of the quality of the monitoring and evaluation aspects of the Framework. Common findings reported through the evaluations included:

[17] A parallel evaluation, entitled "Evaluation of the contribution of the United Nations development system to strengthening national capacities for statistical analysis and data collection to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally-agreed development goals" (JIU/REP/2016/5), found somewhat higher levels of referencing national statistical capacity development in Framework evaluations. However, there were methodological differences between that process and the present meta-evaluation and synthesis, including examining different sets of Framework evaluations.

A very high number of indicators

Unrealistic and ill-defined outcomes

Limited compliance with the calendar for monitoring and evaluation efforts

The challenge of the absence of mechanisms to demonstrate the relationship between Framework outcomes and the activities of the United Nations in support of their attainment

Limited definition of the assumptions, risks and opportunities

93. Approximately half of the evaluation reports recommended strengthening monitoring and evaluation groups, and there were calls for a clear strategy to ensure that the collection and review of monitoring and evaluation data is institutionalized. However, the recommendations were scattered and inconsistent.

94. The causes underlying this shortfall probably relate to issues previously addressed in the meta-evaluation and, specifically, the observation that the Framework evaluation process as a whole has been underfunded. If the Framework evaluation process has been underfunded, it is more than probable that the Framework mechanisms may not have given sufficient priority to monitoring and evaluation activities, given that they are labour-intensive and time-consuming. Moreover, as shown below, the lack of sufficient coordination across country teams also deters coordinated data-gathering.

95. Notwithstanding the causes of this situation, the apparent shortfall in the Framework process related to organizational learning can limit the overall effectiveness of the process. Without the feedback and organizational learning cycle, which is axiomatic in contemporary programme design, organizations lack the internal means to assess their performance not only on a cyclical basis but also on an ongoing periodic basis, so as to effect midcourse corrections to deal with factors caused by changing circumstances or changing needs.

**United Nations system performance**

96. The final set of findings of the synthesis is derived from the assessment frameworks review (see table 2 above) of a number of internal processes of the United Nations at the country level that are designed to strengthen the relevance and subsequent implementation of Framework activities.

97. Mixed evidence in the Framework evaluations with respect to United Nations system coherence and coordination hinders the overall effectiveness of United Nations programming at the country level.

98. The primary identified need for Framework activities was to reduce duplication and fragmentation and ultimately intensify collaboration/coherence at the country level. However, with respect to the United Nations system coordinated response to implementing the Framework, the majority of the validated evaluations (13 out of 23) present mixed findings, with the remainder equally split in presenting mainly positive or mainly negative findings. While the Framework is based on evaluation reports, is considered flexible and appears to contribute to the United Nations system, nine evaluation reports specifically cite challenges where agencies remain connected to their own mandates and where silo decision-making structures

persist. Moreover, an overwhelming amount of evidence drawn from the evaluation reports points to inefficiencies in joint programming and inter-agency work designed to monitor and implement the work falling under different Framework pillars. The main challenges reported were:

A lack of inter-agency communication

A lack of resources to support inter-agency functioning

Insufficient change management

Resident Coordinators' Offices with limited capacity

99. The "Delivering as one" programme countries seem to be experiencing the same kind of coordination challenges as other country teams.

100. Four Framework evaluations from "Delivering as one" programme countries (Albania, Cabo Verde, Mozambique and Rwanda) were deemed to be validated. This resulted in an opportunity, albeit limited in scope, to assess the impact of "Delivering as one" provisions on United Nations system coherence objectives. In the case of "Delivering as one" countries, the reports published between 2010 and 2011 highlighted systemic challenges in instituting the reforms similar in nature to those experienced among the other programme countries.

101. These challenges included:

The first cycle of "Delivering as one" programmes having to retrofit existing activities and joint programmes

Programme portfolios having a high number of small-scale activities

Labour-intensive joint planning efforts

Retention of traditional vertical lines of accountability among United Nations system agencies

Evidence of cost-savings was progressive, although change remained difficult owing to the absence of harmonized rules and regulations

102. However, given the rapid evolution of the "Delivering as one" process as a whole, some of these difficulties may have resolved themselves.

103. While most Framework evaluations report on relationships with donors, national Governments and civil society organizations, there is an absence of any evidence in Framework evaluations regarding the catalytic and leverage effectiveness of Frameworks.

104. The majority of the reports provide evidence of three different types of external relationships: (a) donor agencies; (b) national Governments; and (c) civil society organizations. However, none of the validated reports presented an assessment about whether the Framework mechanism provided an effective framework for leveraging new partnerships with other development actors in a given country. Some 11 reports did not even include discussions of the extent to which the United Nations system was working (or not working) with actors outside the United Nations system. Only one report examined programming where the United Nations system supported a public-private partnership.

# V. Conclusions

105. The present review has identified through a series of findings both the shortfalls that confront the Framework evaluation process and some emerging opportunities with respect to synthesis-related matters.

106. In the light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the centrality of the Framework as the principal means for the United Nations to support national Governments at the country level in their endeavours to implement the Sustainable Development Goals in a nationally relevant context has acquired greater salience. However, the United Nations system at the country level appears not to have given sufficient recognition and support to the involvement of national Governments as full participants in the design, implementation and review of the Framework process. Equally, United Nations organizations at the country level do not appear to have done enough to encourage the national Governments of programme countries to become more active participants in a process that can lead to the strengthening of their own capacity, namely, the Framework process, in the attainment of their national development objectives. Findings 7, 10 and 14 tend to substantiate these observations in their detailing of gaps relative to Member State participation. These two observations therefore, lead to the following initial conclusion.

**Conclusion 1**

107. **The United Nations system does not appear to have invested sufficiently in promoting the role of Member States in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework process.**

108. Two largely strategic recommendations stem from this conclusion. First, it important for the United Nations system itself to redouble its efforts to engage Governments of Member States, especially those of the programme countries, in the Framework process, not as after-the-fact recipients of United Nations support, but as active participants in the design, implementation and subsequent review of the entire Framework and its implementation (recommendation 1). It is also important to underscore to the programme countries themselves the centrality of the Framework process as a means for the United Nations system to support them in their national endeavours (recommendation 2).

109. On the meta-evaluation and synthesis analysis itself, the following series of conclusions demonstrate the degree to which the Framework evaluation process, as presently constituted, may not have met expectations for a review and feedback process being built into the Framework cycle as a whole.

110. It is apparent that country teams have either been unwilling or unable to comply with the United Nations Development Group guidelines. The causes for the low level of compliance on the part of country teams are numerous. However, such a low rate of compliance cannot be explained exclusively by inadequate resources. On balance, it appears that there are more subtle factors at play within country teams and the nature of the overall architecture of the evaluation function of the United Nations system. For example, the electronic survey of Resident Coordinators' Offices and several interviews revealed such issues as overlap and duplication among United Nations agencies with respect to competing evaluation

priorities and reports have had a negative impact on the development of Framework evaluations.

**Conclusion 2**

111. **United Nations country teams and Resident Coordinators' Offices do not seem to be sufficiently convinced that the evaluation process is a vital and necessary element of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework process, especially given the new emphasis placed on nationally contextual development planning in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.**

112. This conclusion results in several recommendations designed to strengthen the Framework process in relation to how it is managed by Resident Coordinators and by the United Nations country teams. Recommendation 3 is designed to underscore the centrality of the Framework process as part of the fundamental review of how the United Nations system organizations will support national Governments at the country level, in relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It emphasizes the centrality of the Framework and places specific onus on Resident Coordinators to ensure that the Framework evaluation process is fully integrated. Inherent in this recommendation is an implied requirement for regular upward reporting on the status of the Framework evaluation process in every country team.

113. A follow-on recommendation (recommendation 4) is designed to address a structural problem in the relationship between the Framework evaluation and other evaluations being undertaken at the national level. This recommendation reiterates the centrality of the Framework evaluation as potentially an overarching tool for the country team, as opposed to a separate and somewhat stand-alone activity. It stresses the need for better coordination at the country level of evaluations and similar review-like activities so as to maximize synergies, reduce overlap and duplication and potentially foster cost savings.

114. Equally, the Framework evaluation process faces a number of major challenges to its relevance and applicability.

115. First, the rate of compliance with the current guidelines is approximately 37 per cent, which is far below any acceptable level and calls into question the overall commitment of United Nations country teams to the process. Second, the quality of the Framework evaluations does not meet even minimum standards or norms for a robust evaluation, for their lack of methodological rigour, inadequate stakeholder engagement and vagueness of recommendations. The magnitude of the gaps, for example, the inability to address the Framework programming principles, the failure to include sufficient evaluation methodologies, the absence of substantial conclusions and actionable and time-sensitive recommendations, points to the need for a substantial overhaul of Framework evaluation guidelines (findings 7-10, 12, 13 and 16).

**Conclusion 3**

116. **The United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluation process, as it is currently configured, is inadequate to meet the emerging challenges inherent in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with the guidance provided in the 2010 United Nations**

**Development Group guidelines and subsequent materials proving inadequate and insufficiently directive to foster the appropriate level of Framework evaluation compliance, leading to qualitative shortfalls that limit effectiveness in promoting longer-term organizational learning.**

117. Recognizing the strategic nature of the meta-evaluation and synthesis process, it would be unwise to set down extensive and excessively prescriptive recommendations, but only to point the way for the redevelopment of the United Nations Development Group guidelines (recommendation 5).

118. A renewed approach should specify that United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards should apply throughout, thus closing a major existing methodological gap (finding 4). There would then be no need for further technical recommendations requiring a fulsome application of United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards.

119. One of the major challenges identified in the present review was the relatively large number of recommendations. It is therefore important for any subsequent reiteration of guidelines to emphasize the need for a relatively smaller number and higher quality of recommendations, ensuring that they be time-sensitive and actionable, with clear lines of accountability set out.

120. Equally, the present review identified challenges with respect to how Framework evaluations review the integration of the programming principles (findings 11 and 12). Finally, the current independent system-wide evaluations approach tended to draw from very limited data sources, primarily desk-based reviews, combined with a limited number of stakeholder interviews (findings 9, 14 and 16). Given the above recommendation, which places direct onus on Resident Coordinators for the planning and management of the Framework process, it is equally viable to suggest that additional sources of data be reviewed so as to broaden the scope and thus increase the eventual relevance of the Framework process.

121. The recommendation, therefore, is designed to strengthen the Framework evaluation process. By reviewing the existing guidelines and subsequent other forms of direction, gaps can be filled and country teams given more precise direct action as to the nature of the Framework evaluation process.

122. The above three conclusions point to limitations within the Framework process and, specifically, the Framework evaluation process. Collectively, they demonstrate that the Framework evaluation process has not lived up to the expectations laid out in the 2010 United Nations Development Group guidelines. However, given the challenges and opportunities inherent in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the accompanying Sustainable Development Goals, the role of the Framework as a nationally contextual United Nations system planning instrument is likely to increase in importance. The recommendations that follow are designed at a strategic level to fill these gaps, so as to methodologically strengthen future Framework evaluations, improve their relevance and increase their role as one of the United Nations' primary tools to support the national attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

# VI. Recommendations

**Recommendation 1**

**123. The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives' Board for Coordination as appropriate, revise, through the United Nations Development Group, programming guidance for the United Nations Development Assistance Framework to emphasize the centrality of the active participation of Member States, especially programme countries, throughout the design and subsequent implementation and evaluation. This revised guidance for country teams and Resident Coordinators' Offices should lay out clear guidelines and systematic approaches for interaction with officials of the Governments of the respective programme country and sensitization on programming principles related to their national development priorities and plans; and, introduce a more systematic approach to mainstream the programming principles into the Framework process.**

**Recommendation 2**

**124. The General Assembly should, through the quadrennial comprehensive policy review process, encourage Member States, especially programme countries, to more fully participate in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework process at the country level by means of early engagement during the development of upcoming Frameworks and participation to the fullest extent throughout their implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The Economic and Social Council should, within the quadrennial comprehensive policy review process, keep under constant review and monitor the measures taken by the United Nations country teams to facilitate the engagement of the programme countries throughout the Framework cycle, including its evaluation.**

**Recommendation 3**

**125. The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives' Board for Coordination as appropriate, initiate, through the United Nations Development Group, a process for sensitizing and specifically instructing United Nations Resident Coordinators on the importance of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluation process as a critical element in the overall United Nations country-level planning processes; and, specifically, for requiring Resident Coordinators to develop an action plan and timetable for conducting Framework evaluations or follow-up evaluations on instruments, for example, sustainable development frameworks, and to integrate the conduct of Framework evaluations into the performance management framework of the Resident Coordinators.**

**Recommendation 4**

**126. The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives' Board for Coordination as appropriate, request other United Nations agencies to better coordinate their evaluation activities at the country level so that such**

**activities can be better integrated into the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluation process.**

**Recommendation 5**

127. **The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives' Board for Coordination as appropriate, revisit, through the United Nations Development Group, the 2010 United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluation guidelines and subsequent direction in the light of the findings of the present report, with a view to strengthening their methodological rigour and design and to increasing the rate of compliance; in particular, the modified guidance should:**

**(a) Emphasize the requirement for actionable recommendations with a clear target audience and time frame for implementation that comply with the United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards;**

**(b) Document the mainstreaming of the Framework programming principles and, in particular, those relating to environmental sustainability;**

**(c) Utilize a robust evaluation design based on multiple data sources, in addition to desk-based (document) reviews and stakeholder interviews.**

# VII. Concluding remarks

128. Although the present review lays out a sobering picture of the current state of the utility of the Framework evaluation process and, by implication, some aspect of the Framework process itself, there is some evidence to express a degree of cautious optimism with respect to the overall process. There appears to be a general willingness to recognize that the past performance with respect to the Framework evaluations has been inadequate and that corrective measures are necessary.

129. The recommendations in the present review are designed less to fix specific challenges and shortfalls, than to address the strategic implications of the strengthening of the Framework evaluation system as a vital part in the overall United Nations planning framework. With the emphasis on nationally contextual solutions as a primary focus of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Framework process necessarily increases in importance.

130. The enhancement of the Framework evaluation mechanism will involve a commitment by senior decision-makers within the United Nations system and those of Member States. An active partnership will be necessary to enhance the quality and relevance of the Framework evaluation mechanism so that it can play its rightful role as a mechanism to promote cooperation, organizational leaning and positive feedback. The present review is a first step in the journey on this process of renewal and redirection.

# Annex I

## List of Framework evaluation reports by countries concerned

| *Report title* | *Date* | *Country* |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Country-Led Evaluation Delivering as One Albania | July 2010 | Albania |
| 2. UNDAF Armenia 2010-2015 Evaluation | August 2014 | Armenia |
| 3. Final Evaluation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (2011-2015) | July 2014 | Azerbaijan |
| 4. United Nations Development Assistance Framework in Bangladesh (2006-2011) | November 2010 | Bangladesh |
| 5. Evaluation Finale UNDAF 2009-2013 | September 2014 | Benin |
| 6. Evaluation of United Nations Development Assistance Framework (2010-2014) | June 2013 | Bosnia and Herzegovina |
| 7. UNDAF End of Period Evaluation | August 2011 | Brazil |
| 8. Country-Led Evaluation of Delivering as One in Cabo Verde: Final Report | July 2010 | Cabo Verde |
| 9. Informe Final de Evaluación del Marco de Asistencia para el Desarrollo (MANUD Chile 2011-2014) | December 2013 | Chile |
| 10. Evaluación Externa: United Nations Development Framework (UNDAF) Colombia 2008-2014 | July 2014 | Colombia |
| 11. Rapport de L'evaluation Finale du Cadre des Nations Unies pour L'Aide au Developpement (UNDAF) | January 2014 | Comoros |
| 12. Costa Rica. Evaluación Final MANUD/UNDAF 2008-2012 | 2011 | Costa Rica |
| 13. Evaluación Final del Marco de Asistencia de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo en Cuba (2008-2012) | May 2012 | Cuba |
| 14. Evaluation finale de l'UNDAF | November 2013 | Djibouti |
| 15. Evaluación del MANUD 2007-2011 | June 2012 | Dominican Republic |
| 16. Evaluación del UNDAF | September 2013 | Ecuador |
| 17. Evaluación Final del UNDAF 2010-2014 | September 2013 | Guatemala |
| 18. Marco De Asistencia De Naciones Unidas Al Desarrollo De Honduras (Undaf) Evaluación Final Del UNDAF 2007-2011 | September 2010 | Honduras |
| 19. United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2007-2011 | June 2010 | Jamaica |
| 20. Madagascar Evaluation finale de l'UNDAF 2008-2013 | June 2013 | Madagascar |

| *Report title* | *Date* | *Country* |
|---|---|---|
| 21. Marco de Cooperación de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, México, 2008-2013 | October 2012 | Mexico |
| 22. UNDAF Evaluation: UN in Mozambique | December 2010 | Mozambique |
| 23. Evaluación del UNDAF 2008-2012 | July 2012 | Nicaragua |
| 24. UNDAF 2009-2013 Terminal Evaluation | July 2014 | Nigeria |
| 25. UNDAF Evaluación 2007-2011 | November 2010 | Panama |
| 26. Evaluación del Marco de Asistencia de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, Panamá 2012-2015 | November 2014 | Panama |
| 27. Final UNDAF Evaluation | December 2011 | Republic of Moldova |
| 28. End of Programme Evaluation of the Rwanda UNDAF (2008-2012) and its Contribution to the Government of Rwanda Development Priorities | November 2013 | Rwanda |
| 29. Country-Led Evaluation of Delivering as One in Rwanda: Final Report | November 2010 | Rwanda |
| 30. Report on the Evaluation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2008-2011 | May 11 | Suriname |
| 31. UNDAF 2010-2015 Evaluation | September 2014 | Tajikistan |
| 32. Final Evaluation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2010-2015 in Turkmenistan | May 2014 | Turkmenistan |
| 33. Final External Evaluation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework in Uzbekistan | October 2014 | Uzbekistan |
| 34. Evaluation of UN-Zambia Development Assistance Framework 2011-2015 and Delivering as One | December 2014 | Zambia |
| 35. UNDAF 2007-2011 Final Evaluation Report | December 2011 | Zimbabwe |
| 36. Independent Evaluation of the 2012-2015 Zimbabwe UNDAF | August 2014 | Zimbabwe |

# Annex II

## Overview of actions to be taken by participating organizations on the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit

**JIU/REP/2016/6**

| | | Intended impact | United Nations, its funds and programmes | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Specialized agencies and IAEA | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | CEB | United Nations* | UNAIDS | UNCTAD | ITC | UNDP | UNEP | UNFPA | UN-Habitat | UNHCR | UNICEF | UNODC | UNOPS | UNRWA | UN-Women | WFP | FAO | IAEA | ICAO | ILO | IMO | ITU | UNESCO | UNIDO | UNWTO | UPU | WHO | WIPO | WMO |
| Report | For action | | ☐ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☐ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☐ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☐ | ☐ | ☒ | ☐ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☒ | ☐ | ☒ | ☐ | ☒ |
| | For information | | ☒ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☒ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☒ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☒ | ☒ | ☐ | ☒ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☒ | ☐ | ☒ | ☐ |
| Recommendation 1 | | i | | E | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Recommendation 2 | | a | | L | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Recommendation 3 | | e | | E | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Recommendation 4 | | c | | E | E | E | | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | | E | E | E | | | E | | E | E | E | E | | E | | E |
| Recommendation 5 | | e | | E | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

**Legend**: **L**: Recommendation for decision by legislative organ; **E**: Recommendation for action by executive head.
■: Recommendation does not require action by this organization.

**Intended impact**: **a**: enhanced transparency and accountability; **b**: dissemination of good/best practices; **c**: enhanced coordination and cooperation; **d**: strengthened coherence and harmonization; **e**: enhanced control and compliance; **f**: enhanced effectiveness; **g**: significant financial savings; **h**: enhanced efficiency; **i**: other.

* As listed in ST/SGB/2015/3.